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DEPT. FOR PRM AND NEA
BAGHDAD AND CAIRO FOR REFCOORDS HILL AND CHEYNE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/27/2016
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [UNRWA](#) [UNHCR](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA OFFERS TO ADMIT (SMALL) NUMBERS OF
PALESTINIANS FLEEING IRAQ

REF: A. DAMASCUS 1853

- [1](#)B. BAGHDAD 1153
- [1](#)C. AMMAN 2016
- [1](#)D. LEHMBERG-KANESHIRO 04/25/06 E-MAIL

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Embassy Damascus has cleared this message.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY: UNHCR Damascus and UNRWA each report that the SARG has in fact agreed to admit Palestinian refugees fleeing Iraq during Palestinian FM Zahar's April 20 visit to Damascus (ref A). However these UN agencies caution that the SARG is trying to limit that commitment to the small group of Iraqi-Palestinians who have been camped on the Jordan-Iraq border since mid-March. Fifty additional Palestinian refugees fled to that makeshift border camp over the weekend; UNHCR's regional missions anticipate that Syria's offer will continue to act as a &pull factor,8 but have been unable to confirm whether the SARG would also admit later arrivals. Separately, FM Zahar wrote to the UNRWA's ComGen April 22 asking her to take the lead in transporting the Palestinians on the Iraq-Jordan border, raising questions about Jordan's willingness to facilitate their transit, and about UNRWA's capacity to expand into cross-border operations. If requested by the Department and in close coordination with concerned posts, refcoord is ready to pursue potential facilitation of re-locating Iraqi-Palestinians to Syria utilizing PRM's third country national transport program for Iraq executed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). END SUMMARY.

UNHCR AND UNRWA CLARIFY SYRIA'S OFFER

[1](#)3. (C) In separate April 24 telcons, UNHCR's mission to Syria and UNRWA told refcoord that SARG authorities responsible for refugee admissions had confirmed Palestinian Authority FM Mahmoud Zahar's claim that Syria agreed to receive some Palestinians fleeing Iraq during his April 20 visit. However, both refugee agencies caution that their contacts stressed that Syria intends to limit its new commitment to the comparatively small population of Palestinians who have already fled to the Iraqi-Jordanian border (refuels). UNHCR Syria Representative Abdelhamid El Ouali told refcoord that officials in the Syrian MFA's International Affairs Department who participated in FM Al Muallim's bilateral with Zahar confirmed that Muallim offered a one-time admission that applies only to Palestinians in the makeshift refugee camp on the Iraqi side of the Karameh-Trebil border crossing. Separately, UNRWA Director of Operations Lex Takkenberg reported that the Director General of Syria's Office of

General Administration for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR) also confirmed that the SARG wants to contain its commitment to that border population.

PULL FACTOR ALREADY AT WORK

14. (SBU) Zahar's announcement, however, has already encouraged additional migration of Baghdad Palestinians. UNHCR Amman Representative Rob Green reports that 50 more Palestinians arrived at the Karmeh-Trebil crossing on the Jordan/Iraq frontier late April 22, bringing the current population of Palestinians at the Jordanian border to 238. Rumors of additional movements towards Syria persist, but UNHCR has not confirmed any new arrivals at Syrian border crossings as of April 27.

UN AND PLO PRESS SARG ON NEXT STEPS

15. (C) To confirm whether the SARG's admission offer excludes the more recent border arrivals and to explore the SARG's intentions to provide direct assistance for the new Iraqi-Palestinian arrivals, the UN Resident Coordinator in Damascus requested an urgent meeting with the SARG MFA on behalf of UNHCR and UNRWA April 26. However, UNRWA reports that MFA officials were unprepared to answer any of their questions at that meeting, and asked the UN to defer discussion on the issue until the SARG could form an inter-agency committee to review its position. The PLO Department of Refugee Affairs (DORA) office in Amman has subsequently confirmed with GAPAR that that committee has been formed; According to DORA DG Mohammed Abu Bakr, GAPAR assured him they would have answers on Sunday (April 30).

PA FM ASKS UNRWA TO CARRY OUT CROSS-BORDER OPS

16. (C) In the meantime, UNRWA is considering how to moderate PA and the SARG expectations. Director of Operations Takkenberg told refcoord April 24 that UNRWA could extend its basic health, education and relief services to 250 new arrivals in Syria without asking for additional resources from donors, but confirmed that UNRWA has no capacity to stand-up a reception center and has no available housing or land in its 10 existing camps in Syria. To rent private housing in Syria, UNRWA would have to seek additional resources from donors, the SARG or possibly UNHCR, given the precedent it established in Jordan in 2003. (NOTE: UNHCR continues to transfer \$30,000 a year to UNRWA to provide cash and food assistance to the 386 Iraqi-Palestinians who were allowed to leave Ruweished camp in August 2003 and reside indefinitely in Jordan, but who are unable to work due to limitations placed on their residency permits. END NOTE.) Privately, Takkenberg hoped the SARG would re-assess the option of turning to UNHCR, which could house the new arrivals in its existing camp in El Hol.

17. (C) Takkenberg also revealed that UNRWA is already faced with a pending request from the PA. According to Takkenberg, PA FM Zahar wrote to UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen Abu Zayd April 22 asking UNRWA to contact the SARG to expedite the transport of Palestinians on the Jordan-Iraq border. Takkenberg was confident that UNRWA would try to turn over any cross-border tasks to UNHCR given that UNRWA has no operational experience in Iraq. Separately, UNHCR Jordan Representative Rob Green confirmed that the UN Resident Representative in Damascus has already approached Jordan's Ambassador to Syria to request transit for the border population. Green, however, was skeptical that Jordan would respond positively to this request, explaining that the GOJ has already expressed concern that the Palestinians camped on its border intend to become permanent residents given that 10 of them are married to Jordanian nationals.

18. (C) Jordan is unlikely to facilitate transit for Palestinians leaving Iraq, even those with firm third-country

admission offers. With USG funding, IOM runs a successful program to voluntarily relocate stranded migrants in Iraq. In the past, with facilitation from Embassy Baghdad's refcoord and in coordination with the Department, IOM has worked cooperatively with MNF-I to ensure safe passage for several hundred persons through the Iraq-Syria border. In conversations with Amman refcoord and PRM, IOM has said that it can organize the relocation of the Palestinians from the Iraq border (through Iraq) to Syria, assuming official authorization from the SARG. IOM has the capacity to provide air or overland transport under its existing third country national transport program for Iraq. Using this USG-funded program may be a feasible method of relocating the group, and avoids having to demarche the Government of Jordan for cross border operations by UNRWA (or other organizations) or other arrangements for intra-Jordan travel. Should the Department and relevant posts consider such an outcome desirable, refcoord is ready to engage those organizations necessary to pursue this option.

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